

ALEXANDER COZENS

1717–1786

A COASTAL LANDSCAPE

Brown washes with bodycolour on original mount

18 ¾ x 19 ⅞ inches; 476 x 502 mm

Signed on mount, lower left: 'Alex Cozens'

Drawn c.1763



Collections: Christie's, 11 November 1958, lot 85;
Agnew's, acquired from the above;
H.G. Balfour, acquired from the above, February 1959;
Semley Auctioneers, 24 January, 2009, lot 139;
Private collection to 2025

Literature: *Walker's Monthly*, vol.20, August 1929, p.3.

Exhibition: London, Agnew's 86th Annual Exhibition of Water-Colours and Drawings,
1959, cat. no.43.

This monumental landscape drawing is one of Alexander Cozens's boldest and most ambitious works, produced on an unusually large scale. A sophisticated essay in light and shade and the organisation of forms and voids, this large composition can be dated to 1763 and related to an important sequence of ambitious drawings Cozens made to illustrate his ideas about morality and landscape. A successful drawing master and landscape painter, Cozens spent much of his career devising and refining various systems for producing ideal landscapes. From 1759 until his death in 1786, Cozens worked on at least five separate treatises on art ranging from basic practical advice to ambitious explorations of aesthetics. Most notably, Cozens provided a system whereby apparently accidental 'blots' were developed into highly refined classical landscapes. Aimed at amateurs, the 'New Method' codified much of the intellectual underpinning of professional painters of the period, such as Thomas Gainsborough.¹ In the present beautifully worked drawing, Cozens has composed a complex and highly structured landscape, the golden light, flat sea and unhurried activity of the figures on shore and afloat all accord with Cozens's designation of such coastal landscapes as intending to excite feelings of safety. Preserved in exceptional condition, this rare work, ranks as one of Cozens's most important large-format drawings.

¹ Kim Sloan, *Alexander and John Robert Cozens: The Poetry of Landscape*, New Haven and London, 1986, pp.36-62.

In 1990 a series of six large-format landscapes by Alexander Cozens appeared on the London art market.² At the time the Cozens scholar Kim Sloan associated them, along with a dated example now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London and examples at the National Gallery of Scotland, Birmingham City Art Gallery, Cecil Higgins Art Gallery in Bedford and in the Oppé Collection at the Tate, with the ambitious project Cozens himself called his 'great work'.³ Now known from contemporary notes prepared by Ozias Humphry, Cozens's project was to devise a system of sixteen landscapes which were to stimulate appropriate responses in the viewer. Etchings illustrating the system were made but the proposed work, to be called *The Various Species of Composition of Landscape in Nature*, was never published. A list was codified by the Reverend Charles Davy and appropriate responses to each of the compositions recorded by John Constable. The present drawing appears to be listed as number 4 'the view in full front of a bay or sound' which can be associated in Constable's list with feelings of 'safety, shelter from storms.'

In the present complex work, Cozens shows a placid, flat sea with a single yacht in the middle-distance. But this safe environment is tempered by the massive, rocky cliff on the left and the rocks in the foreground, which are suggestive of latent danger. In 1757 Edmund Burke had published his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Burke argued that viewing awesome prospects like jagged rocks or expanses of sea inspired a thrilling sense of terror, which contrasted with the gentle and seductive pleasures of the beautiful. Whilst no preparatory study for the present composition seems to survive, it can be related to a sheet from the so-called Mackworth Praed Book now in the Tate, which shows that Cozens was experimenting with open coastal compositions as he prepared his 'great work.' Preserved in spectacular condition, this thrilling drawing demonstrates the importance of Cozens to a future generation of landscape draughtsman from Joseph Wright of Derby, who practiced the blot method, to John Robert Cozens, John Constable and JMW Turner.



Alexander Cozens
Fishing Boats in a Bay Below Cliffs
Watercolour and opaque watercolour, with gum arabic
glaze, over graphite on wove paper.
19 3/16 x 25 5/8 inches; 486 x 650 mm
Early 1760s
Thaw Collection. The Morgan Library & Museum.
2017.43.

² Sotheby's, London, 15 March 1990, lots 34-39.

³ Kim Sloan, *Alexander and John Robert Cozens: The Poetry of Landscape*, New Haven and London, 1986, pp.56-57.